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RELIGIOUS FAITH AND RATIONALISM IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S *SMALL GODS*

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ABSTRACT

Stella Puhakka: Religious Faith and Rationalism in Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods*
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This thesis examines the treatment of institutional religion, religious faith and believers in Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods* arguing that the novel calls for transparency and fairness in religious institutions and critical thinking, understanding and tolerance from those with a belief system. The novel highlights these issues through the relationship between its main character, Brutha, and his god, Om, as they explore the world beyond the theocratic nation of Omnia. Their interactions with one another and the world at large are analysed with the help of fantasy and satire as well as real world equivalents for the ideas, ideologies and religions presented.

Small Gods uses both religious and political satire in its efforts to criticise religion. In its political satire, the novel highlights the dangers of the intertwining of religion, state, and law enforcement, and questions religious expansion and censorship for power's sake. Its religious satire, on the other hand, is more interested in religious figures, ideas and texts as it ridicules extremism within such institutions. These two types of satire are irrevocably linked to one another within the novel as those seeking political power do so through religious means. They are also used to highlight the individuals inside these outwardly dangerous institutions and show the conditions in which they practice their faith. By showing different individuals within these institutions, *Small Gods* highlights a need for compassion and understanding in our discussions with individuals who choose to believe differently from us. It also reminds readers that they should not believe in something blindly, but rather criticise and question what they are told in order to keep themselves and others honest and safe.

In the end, Pratchett's satire is a soft but effective call for critical thinking, understanding and separation of religious and political aims. It also shows that everything made by humans will have its own faults because its creators are not perfect but this does not make all human-made things evil. On the contrary, most of the human-made religions, ideologies, scientific discoveries and political institutions in *Small Gods* were initially trying to make human lives easier and to provide society with rules and certainty. Therefore, this thesis argues that *Small Gods* is not an antireligious novel but rather a novel about critical thinking.

Keywords: faith, belief, religion, critical thinking, satire, fantasy, Terry Pratchett, Small Gods,

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1. Introduction

Terry Pratchett is best known as the author of comic fantasy novels set in Discworld, which is a world so unlike our own that it presents an opportunity to show our own in a different light (Timmerman, 2). In the forty-one published Discworld novels, Pratchett parodies everything from Shakespeare to modern politicians, and satirizes subjects such as the justice system and folklore (Alton & Spruiell, 4-5). It then comes as no surprise that he endeavours to parody and satirize religion in *Small Gods*.

Concerning itself largely with religion's relationship with the truth and with the power of fear and belief alike, *Small Gods* intertwines criticism of religion's spiritual aspects with its corporeal realities. Spiritually, religion is about anyone's personal relationship with their god and usually with the scripture surrounding it, whereas the corporeal side of religion is an institution with its own internal hierarchies and accepted interpretations of scripture. Through its satire, *Small Gods* calls to question faith, organized religion and the need for belief. It is, however, tolerant of people believing in general. Through its satire of religion, *Small Gods* highlights the need for critical thinking and tolerance on both sides of the debate on religion's place in the modern world.

For the purposes of this thesis, faith will refer to "a system of religious belief" (*OED*), usually where a combination of doctrine and god is discussed, and belief to "acceptance or conviction of the existence or occurrence of something" (*OED*), mostly when discussing belief (or lack thereof) in a god and belief in science or the shape of the world.

At its core, *Small Gods* is a story about a boy and his god. The boy, Brutha, is capable of remembering everything he has ever experienced but is seen as dim-witted by his peers and superiors in the theocratic nation of Omnia. Over time the country, governed by its religious leaders from the holy city of Kom, has transformed into a powerful but oppressive place that

does not hesitate to use violence to gain new territories or keep its citizens compliant. Unlike his countrymen, Brutha truly believes in their god, Om, who is more a show-off than a caring protector of the innocent. There is, however, a catch: in Discworld belief determines the strength and powers of gods, serving as their nourishment and life force. If Brutha, the only person to still believe in Om, should stop believing or die, Om would cease to exist (*Small Gods*, 319-20). It is through their relationship that Pratchett highlights the difference between religion as faith and religion as membership in an institution raising the question of how many Omnians truly believe in Om.

Though Pratchett's body of work has been studied in essay collections such as, *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (Butler, 2004) and *Philosophy and Terry Pratchett* (Held, 2014), *Small Gods* itself has gained little critical attention. Researchers have spoken about Brutha as a young man whose identity is still being shaped (Mendlesohn, 2004. 243-244) and about *Small Gods* as a parody of monotheistic religions (Mansikkamäki, 1-2) and of *The Book of New Sun* (Clute, 27-28). This thesis will lean on these ideas as it discusses religion as both a political institution and as individual faith or belief in *Small Gods*. In order to analyse what the novel might be saying about religion, this thesis will need to understand both fantasy and satire as genres, and how they work together as a vehicle for criticism. It will also analyse in further detail passages wherein belief and faith are discussed in relation to relevant examples within existing religions, be it in scripture or political agenda, and in historical contexts. Through these methods, the way in which *Small Gods* calls for transparency and fairness in religious institutions and critical thinking, understanding and tolerance from those with a belief system will become clear.

2. Fantasy and Satire

This section will discuss the combination of fantasy and satire as well as the possibilities they provide for the criticism within *Small Gods*. These possibilities are largely in the genre-specific expectations of fantasy and the mode-specific tools utilized by satire. As such, understanding the type of fantasy world in which *Small Gods* is set and the kinds of satire present is important for further analysis of its content.

Given that *Small Gods* is marketed as a comic fantasy novel, it is important to understand what this means for the literary devices it utilizes. These devices are taken from two specific styles of writing: satire and fantasy. Satire, defined as "the use of humour … to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices" (*ODE*), is a mode whose bite lies in that the reader knows (or suspects) "that the victims are 'real'" (Griffin, 132). At its simplest, fantasy, on the other hand, could be defined as a genre that deals with suppositions that have no solid grounds, that are mere figments of imagination (*OED*) and, as such, do not and cannot exist in reality, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In combining these two aspects Discworld provides a world where the impossible intertwines with commentary on what is, such as was the case with *Gulliver's Travels* before it.

If satire at its core is mockery of an existing state of affairs then we are meant to find amusement in it and somehow connect the satire to its real life counterpart. This amusement may arise from what Highet calls satire's "difficult to mistake" vocabulary and style (18). This vocabulary would include words that are not typically used in literature, such as colloquialisms, words that may be cruel or dirty, or that are purposefully comic (Highet, 18). Highet also suggests that satire is meant to be various and that satirists supposed to try to produce the unexpected in order to keep everyone guessing and gasping (18). This demand for variety extends to vocabulary and stylistic choices as well. Although satire may use many different

devices for variety, *Small Gods* emphasizes antithesis, exaggeration, parody and violence - both regular and comedic.

In *Small Gods,* these satirical elements exist within the sphere of the imaginary fantasy world of Discworld, which is a flat disc placed a top four elephants on the shell of a turtle that swims across the universe (428-430). The existence of such a world seems impossible to its readers and as such Discworld is what Mendlesohn (2008, 89) describes as an immersive fantasy: it functions as a complete world on all levels and is impervious to outside influences. In the case of *Small Gods*, it is also an intrusion fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008, 147) because Om disrupts normality by initiating contact with Brutha and by doing so, he breaks the rules of their world, as Brutha's reaction makes clear to the novel's readers. However, eventually Brutha accepts the intrusion as the new normal: the fantasy normalizes the other (Mendlesohn 2008, 147-48).

Small Gods combines satire of what is with fantasy's penchant for the impossible. Fantasy creates new realities (Timmerman, 1) filled with creatures and skills that would be impossible in our own. In responding to our craving for otherness, fantasy provides us with ways to see a problem from a new angle and to find new answers (Timmerman, 2). The use of a fantasy setting alters how the target of satire is seen: unfamiliar settings and names allow the possible targets to range from Christianity to religious institutions at large. In science fiction studies, this is called cognitive estrangement (Parrinder, 4). The basic idea behind cognitive estrangement is that "by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective" (Parrinder, 4). Given this broad description, a fantasy novel like *Small Gods* set in a strange world and with a clear critical eye towards our own society can also estrange its subjects in this manner. In the case of *Small Gods*, this combination of fantasy and satire allows the author to make holy wars, the intertwining of politics and religion, and denial of information seem laughable.

3. Politics of an Organized Religion

Political satire often consists of reproductions of political figures and ideas in an exaggerated and humorous manner (Highet, 76-77). These reproductions are used to mock the original and, through this mockery, to criticize them. *Small Gods* creates a theocracy built around a religion which aims to control every facet of the lives of its followers. This theocracy is an exaggerated reproduction of the way in which religion becomes intertwined with political discussions in the United States of America (Hertzke 1989, 298) and modern European nations, such as the United Kingdom where politicians have affected religious decisions and religious figures in turn have affected political discussion (Mews 1989, 286-88). Christianity and biblical ideas are also brought up in political discussions, especially when these discussions concern abortion (Hertzke 1989, 304-308), even though the political institution is meant to govern all its people equally and allow for religious freedom (*Human Rights Act 1998* c. 42, Article 9).

In its political satire *Small Gods* presents its readers with a religious institution that has become so prevalent in its nation that the institution might as well be the nation: Omnia has become an Omnian theocracy. Their theocracy has encumbering hierarchy, religious law, religion-based law enforcement and no democratic elections, which together create a toxic environment where it is every man for himself. This Omnian theocracy wishes to expand to all corners of the Disc and is not afraid to use censorship to gain the full support of its followers. This religious institution is then used to highlight the dangers of the intertwining of religion, state, and law enforcement, and question religious expansion and censorship for power's sake.

3.1 Omnia and Omnianism

On its political side, Omnianism is an institution so encumbered by hierarchy that those at the bottom have no way of communicating with those at the top (256), unless they are being punished for something they did not do or wish to be taken to the Quisition, which functions as the police force of Omnia: a body that seeks out and punishes heresy. Omnia has taken the organized and institutional side of religion to an extreme: it is a theocracy governed by religious leaders, where even suspected heresy is punishable by death (252-4). This theocratic institution of Omnia has clear parallels with ancient Jerusalem and the medieval Vatican (Mansikkamäki, 19-20). For instance the holy city is large, sprawling and built around the Citadel (*Small Gods*, 283) which is similar to the descriptions of the first temple of Jerusalem (*KJV,* 1 Kings 6:5): "And against the wall of the house […] chambers round about, against the walls of the house round about, both of the temple and of the oracle: and he made chambers round about". People in the early Jewish society (Second Temple Period, 516BCE-70CE) came to the temple but the temple itself was only the domain of priests (Goldhill, 74-75), as is the case in Omnia.

In a theocratic nation like Omnia, religion is closely intertwined with every decision in in both the making and enforcement of laws. The religious leader is also the leader of the nation, and the religious centre of the kingdom is the political and social centre of the nation as well. The use of a theocracy to showcase the politics of religion is largely an exaggeration of how it functions in real life Europe and the United States of America. Although these Western nations are not theocracies, religious ideas arise in political discussions surrounding controversial topics such as abortion (Gouveia, 31-34) and same-sex marriage (Goldberg-Hiller, 4-8). These nations are also not monotheistic in the way that Omnia is: they allow for freedom of religion, even if the majority of the population is often Christian in varying degrees. Despite this, elected officials have religious convictions or ideologies of their own, which they sometimes allow to affect their political decisions (Keneally, 233). It must then be questioned if these

democratically elected representatives of the population of a nation should be allowed to drive political change from the perspective of their own religious or ideological convictions. On the other hand, should their nation and political institution be allowed to demand that they overcome their own morals, ethics and faith in order to only ever act in the interest of the nation at large? After all, they are only human.

This intertwining of the religious and the secular is further emphasized with Omnia's law enforcement. As a parodic representation of the Spanish Inquisition of 1478-1502 (Pérez, 1) and perhaps, a throwback to the series of Monty Python sketches (1970) based around the Spanish Inquisition., the Omnian Quisition is a terrifying force of religious law enforcement. It is the threat of being thrown into the cells and torture pits in the basements of the Citadel that keeps Omnians in line (263-4). The narrator of *Small Gods* states that "Fear is strange soil. Mainly it grows obedience" (263), which is important if those with power wish to stay in power. Fear of punishment in the afterlife is how monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, usually control how their followers behave but for a religion wielding political power, the threat of punishment in life is a much more effective tool. In the past, Christianity has used excommunication as a tool to this end (Latham, 116 and 149) and even today, Mormons can be excommunicated if they behave in a manner thought to be against God's will (Goodstein): this threat of punishment allows those making the rules to control what their followers think and how they act.

When religion, state, law and law-enforcement become one, they have no system of checks and balances to subscribe to that might keep them honest. Omnia's leader, the Cenobiarch, is technically speaking sovereign in his decision-making until a prophet with new rules from their god arrives. During the events of *Small Gods* he is an old man for whom decisions are made by people "found several levels down, where it's still possible to get things done" (258): Omnia cannot even manage a functioning theocracy without interference from

power-hungry individuals. The Quisition, on the other hand, does not believe in what they enforce and this makes them seem ridiculous as they simply parrot lines from scripture and torture confessions out of the innocent. Their violent behavior is used to shock readers, who have not experienced a police force like this. Law enforcement is meant to follow the letter and spirit of the law but when it is allowed to make its own rules, it becomes unjust and unfair, such as the Quisition's habit of torturing people who have not yet committed a crime (329-30): they are allowed to act as judge, jury and executioner at their discretion. Unlike the Quisition, real officers and politicians involved in actions like these can be held accountable for their actions in both public discourse and under local law. In this way, the corrupt politicians and the Quisition are an exaggeration of real life events but also a scary and violent possibility of what could be if people become too afraid to speak against the actions of an institution and its leadership.

The important argument in Omnia's exaggerated theocratic nation is the place of religion in politics and, by extension, in law enforcement. Judging by Brutha's statement on who should govern their country, religion has no place in political decision-making, and neither do soldiers: "Priests shouldn't [govern]. They can't think about it properly. Nor should soldiers" (492). Throughout the novel priests are shown to make decisions that lead to suffering for the Omnians, such as choosing to begin a holy war (258-62). This is probably because, although they are experts in scripture, prayer and ceremony, they are not experts in governance or legislation. Priests are also experts in taking orders from a higher being. Similarly soldiers are experts in warfare and taking orders from a higher ranking officer. They do not question the orders they receive and, indeed, follow them blindly. Neither party is really used to giving their own orders to someone and because of their very specific fields of expertise, they would struggle to make decisions that would lead to a healthy, happy people.

Small Gods seems to suggest that people armed with both freedom and knowledge make better choices and life improving inventions. Brutha appears to think that when given the choice, people will choose the better option be it making peace, doing what is right or choosing a religion (474-7, 483-4), and even goes as far as to suggest changing Omnia's form of governance into a democracy because "you have to have someone everyone distrusts … That way, everyone's happy" (492). This argument is further supported by the introduction of the antithesis, or a "straightforward conflicting pair" (Allison, 567), for Omnia's theocracy in Ephebe's democracy (349-50). The Ephebean government is a democracy wherein a new Tyrant is democratically elected every five years (*Small Gods*, 349-50). Ephebe functions much better than the theocratic Omnia, which may be because their government is entirely separate from religion: the Ephebeans are allowed to discuss, write and invent and, as a result, science in Ephebe has flourished (335-7).

Omnia highlights what modern nations could become if ideologies were allowed to grow unchecked and unquestioned. A nation state's laws and its systems of separation of different bodies of governance from one another and of religion from state are there to protect its people from persecution, bias and tyranny. Despite these protections, people can fail their duty to their nation and their nation can fail them when an individual's hunger for power is not sated through other means. This individual seeking power and looking to keep their peers in the dark, where their intentions are concerned, may do so through clever uses of propaganda and censorship, and by directing attention to other issues, such as where the border between us and them should be.

3.2 Expansion and Censorship

In *Small Gods* the Omnian expansion is closely connected to the censorship the institution practices. This censorship allows the Omnian institution to keep its followers in the dark about the world and the actions of the institution. Through these actions the religious institution consolidates further power over its people and over the nation as a whole.

Omnia wishes to expand, to go to war and to make everyone believe as they do. This is akin to the way real life Christians and Muslims have behaved where spreading their religion is concerned: Christians spread their religion from Europe to Africa (Brock, 132-5) and the Americas (Gould, 19-22) whereas Muslims at one time ruled over Jerusalem (Latham, 126) and extreme, radicalistic Islam has more recently begun to deal with infidels with a heavy hand (Hughes, ix-xiv). The Omnians have destroyed kingdoms weaker than themselves and have chosen nearby Ephebe as their next target. It is a holy war that most Europeans would like to think is a thing of the past, but for the Omnians, it is an everyday fact of life. They are not only at war with those outside their empire but also with those inside it: the system that is meant to take care of them, to protect them is actually harming them and impossible to fight against. Like the Christians of the Crusades or Muslims of the Muslim Conquests (Latham, 145-146), the Omnians are going to these lands around them swords first.

During their holy wars, many Omnians have died for their god and lies (476). The people in the Citadel are told that all battles have ended in "glorious victories", but as Om tells Brutha, "only the losers […] have glorious victories" (331) by which he means that those who lost many lives are the likeliest to call that victory "glorious" while the others mourn their dead and try to learn from their mistakes. Omnians battle for their Church and in the name of their god because they have been told that to die for a god is the finest thing, even though gods need people to live and believe in them (476). This is where the corrupting influence of humanity can be seen: their god asked them to make others believe in him but because he was not specific

about how this should be done, this command has been used as a way to get Omnians to do as the politically ambitious want them to do. This same issue of politics intertwining itself with the religious can be seen in the Crusades where in the name of religious interests, popes would offer "indulgences, privileges and protection" to the princes and nobles so that they would participate in the pilgrimage or crusade (Latham, 147). In *Small Gods* Vorbis alludes to a change in Brutha's status if he does as he is told where their conversation and trip to Ephebe is concerned, "I think we shall have to see to it that you become Subdeacon Brutha just as soon as possible; what do you think of that?" (288) Later Brutha is made into an archbishop by Vorbis, who expects Brutha to remain silent about what really happened in the desert (442-46). This same kind of thinking is evident on the other side of the equation as well, where Simony, a sergeant of the Holy Legion, thinks that facts cannot inspire people, because people need a cause and a symbol for which to fight (430), a statement which he takes a step further when he is willing to trade Brutha's life for the loyalty of his countrymen: "We can make Brutha's death a symbol for people, don't you see?" (471). It is in this sense that he is buying or selling something spiritual (or closely connected) and becomes the embodiment of simony. During our history instead of telling people that they were given these indulgences, leaders have used religion as a symbol for which to fight.

Omnianism uses censorship both to control its followers and how they view the world. Most Omnians do not know how to read (264), and those who express an incorrect way of thought are sent to the Quisition and usually found guilty of heresy (252-4). The idea of expressing incorrect ideas and being punished for them is prevalent in real world religious contexts as well: every religion has its own accepted interpretations of scripture, which is why many religions have split into different branches of themselves from Christianity's Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant branches to Islam's Sunni and Shi'ah. Omnia is filled with systematic censorship designed to keep the people in the dark and punishments that make them fear for

their lives and keep them compliant: Books, other than their scripture and books of their prophets, are forbidden and destroyed (270). This censorship stops them from learning about the outside world or, indeed, about the world in general, which in of itself is amusing given that their own scripture states (339): "Ignorance is itself a sin." Because of this lack of knowledge, they have no way of rebelling against the institution or really thinking about the world and their beliefs in a critical manner.

Omnia is a political machine that aims to expand and keep its followers in the dark through censorship and intimidation tactics. These expansionist tendencies are only quelled by the nation's lack of knowledge and scientific advancement, which are directly affected by the censorship the nation practices. But given the representations of healthy religious and political institutions in *Small Gods*, the novel does not appear to call for war on religion but rather tolerance for one another.

4. Religion, Faith and Belief

Small Gods ties its political satire to religious satire full of humorous reproductions of religious figures, ideas, and texts to mock and criticize their real life counterparts. For instance, the rules a follower must obey are often ridiculous, such as "ignorance itself is a sin" (*Small Gods*, 339), which effectively means that no one could ever convert to Omnianism. Additionally, given the institution does not allow its members to read anything aside from Omnian texts, calling ignorance a sin makes little sense, since all of its members would then be sinners for being ignorant about the world. These reproductions are closely related to how the novel satirizes the followers of religions and how they believe. This may be in an effort to highlight the hypocrisy of the faithful and "the discrepancy between profession and practice", especially considering the demands that religions impose on their followers (Pollard, 11-12). This is the case with Vorbis, the leader of the Quisition, which is a highly religious law enforcement agency: he does not believe but presents a front of piety. By contrast, Brutha believes blindly. These characters present two extremes of the faithful: a straightforward antithetical pair (Allison, 567). In a sense, *Small Gods* is interested in the human condition surrounding religion. This human condition can also tie into the political satire within the novel in that those seeking political power often do so through religious means.

Small Gods dives into that human condition by contrasting fear and belief in its discussion of how the two may lead to loss of faith. This contrast then leads into its discussion of prophets, followers and Brutha, who embody different aspects of religious belief, fear and the battle that ensues within each of them where faith and the loss thereof are concerned. These are irrevocably linked to the interaction of critical thinking and religious faith, and whether the two are able to coexist.

4.1 Fear, Belief and Loss of Faith

The followers of Omnianism have started to believe more in the institution, which consists of the hierarchy, rituals and scriptures of the church, than they do in their god. This is largely because they fear the institution more than they fear their god: Om is less likely to hurt them than the Quisition. Om, quoting Abraxas, says that "Belief *shifts*. People start out believing in the god and end up believing in the structure" (367) and maybe eventually the god dies and no one notices (368). This would not be such a bad thing if Omnianism was a less cruel religion, if the first believer had been a goatherd and not a shepherd (325-6) and, indeed, if as a result Om's view of people had not been shaped by this shepherd. Om thinks that people need to be driven like sheep, not led like goats. If fear is belief's only driving factor, eventually that belief is transferred to whatever is actually punishing the believer. Brutha states this clearly when he reminds Om of the god's poor choices in the desert, "All you did was stamp around and roar and try to make people afraid. Like … like a man hitting a donkey with a stick. But people like Vorbis made the stick so good, that's all the donkey ends up believing in" (427). A people treated like sheep, heralded by a cruel shepherd, eventually start to act like sheep: terrified and only caring about survival.

There are real life examples of belief shifting to new gods or atheism, which was the case for the Finnish gods (Latham, 127) that have since become myths and legends for those whose ancestors believed in them, instead of shifting to the institution as seems to have been the case for Omnianism. This can also happen without a religion dying out entirely when someone converts to another one or simply stops believing in a higher power. Science has stepped into explain many of the natural phenomena that these old religions explained through their gods and as such, they have become irrelevant to today's world. The same can be seen with the Ephebeans: "'They have many gods, and they don't pay them much attention,' said Brutha. 'And they search for ignorance'" (369). The move towards atheism may also be

partially due to science: people cannot prove that gods exist and blind belief has become less acceptable as a result. In *Small Gods*, Simony tells Om that he cannot "get round [him] by existing" (476) which may seem like an odd thing to say but in a world where gods need people more than people need gods, it makes perfect sense. This reaction highlights the fact that both sides of the discussion believe equally blindly: although there is no proof that gods exist, there is none to the contrary either. This particular antithesis of theist and atheist becomes a doublet instead (Allison, 567) as their equal blindness is established.

As is the case with Omnianism, some real religions have shifted from believing in their respective gods to believing in the ethical rules provided by the scripture and the institution surrounding it: their followers may associate its buildings and books more with the religion than with its gods, and practicing becomes more of a habit than an action of faith. In *Small Gods*, characters such as Fri'it only go through the motions of their religion but do not actually believe in its writings:

> "true and obvious ideas, such as the ineffable wisdom and judgement of the Great God Om, seemed so obscure to many people that you actually had to kill them before they saw the error of their ways […] They'd prefer to die rather than see sense. Fri'it had seen sense at an early age. He'd seen it was sense not to die" (261).

The novel seems to allow its readers to judge any character based on that character's actions and morality, and not just the quantity or quality of their belief. While the Omnians would not agree, identifying as a Christian or a Muslim but not following all of that religion's tenets should not result in being judged as a hypocrite by those who are not members of that particular institution or as a pagan by those who are. The genuineness of someone's belief cannot be seen on the outside because someone might identify strongly through the religion of their people and, as such, wear all of its symbols on the outside and still not believe in any of it. With this

in mind, *Small Gods* seems to counsel restraint where judgement of other people's actions and beliefs is concerned.

Small Gods also shows that knowledge does not have to always replace belief but rather the two may coexist. Brutha is the only believer Om has left but even his belief is exaggerated and riddled with doubt when faced with a turtle claiming to be his god. When Brutha's belief is first properly described, Pratchett writes "Brutha didn't just believe. He really Believed" (257), which at this early stage of the novel seems exaggerated because Omnianism is shown to have many followers but becomes less so as it is revealed that Brutha alone believes in Om. It is, however, unclear whether some of the things he finds amazing and belief-reinforcing are actually due to his unquestioning belief, or simple lack of knowledge. This is especially evident when Om finds water for them to drink in the desert and Brutha calls it a miracle, though it is a find based on scientific knowledge (410). This is of particular interest as it reveals a willingness to see almost everything from the perspective of one's belief: Despite having the science explained to him by Om, Brutha still sees it as evidence of his god's greatness precisely because it is "water in the desert" (410). As Brutha says afterwards, "Just because you can explain it doesn't mean it's not still a miracle" (410).Throughout the novel, Brutha learns to think critically and to question everything that he used to believe blindly. After discussions with his god, Brutha begins to question what his religion has told him, "Then he added: 'According to Book One of the Septateuch, anyway.' I've never thought like this before, he thought. I'd never have said 'anyway.'" (328) and discussions with other people along his journey allow him to have thoughts on everything from the morals and the laws of his country to the shape of the world. Although his faith in his god does not falter - how could it when his god is real – he becomes an advocate for knowledge and the humane treatment of others.

As *Small Gods* presents its readers with a multitude of gods and religions – all with their own ways of acting and believing – the contrast between the loss of faith Om has

experienced and that which the other gods face becomes very stark. Om, who has left reinforcement of belief to a grand institution, has begun to wither out of existence while gods who still perform their own smiting are alive and well. There is a willing blindness exemplified by members of the Omnian Church, who fear the institution enough to unquestioningly do whatever it takes to stay alive and even those with differing ideals within the Church seem to blindly direct their belief at this new ideal instead. It is through the character of Brutha that readers are shown how these characters are just different sides of the same coin. As the novel is centred on Brutha's growth from someone with blind faith in both his god and his religion to someone capable of doubt and critical thinking, *Small Gods* does not stand against belief itself but rather against intimidation and blind faith.

4.2 Prophets, Followers and Brutha

Small Gods reminds its readers that no institution can exist without its leaders and followers, and those followers are not one uniform mass but instead, they are a diverse group of people with different ways of expressing and acting based on their belief.

Where religion is concerned, we often work from the point of view of appearance: people will accept as religious truth that which is presented in a form that is customary for religious texts or people. If there is one thing that is reliable about Omnianism, it is the time between their prophets, who turn up like clockwork every two hundred years or so (245). The relationship between a prophet and Om is special and proves that the prophet themselves is also special as Om would not speak to just anyone (248). Because Omnians have an image in their heads of what a prophet should be like, they do not contest potential false prophets who fit this profile. Vorbis, the apparent villain of the novel, is one such man. He is vividly described as a tall, stick-thin man, who may as well have been "modelled in clay by a child" (250) and a

face that is impossible to read (251). Characters in *Small Gods* remark on him being a man marked by destiny (272) and even Om thinks that "Vorbis would have been better [than Brutha]. Be rational. A mind like that could do anything!" (317). When Om eventually offers Brutha the position of his prophet for the first time, Brutha declines because "everyone knows Vorbis will be the next prophet!" (368). At this point Brutha is still unaware that Vorbis is a cruel, violent and power-hungry politician, and not the religious man he would like others to see him as. He spends most of his time alone "prostrate in prayer" (329), remembers when fast days are and fasts on them, and quotes scripture whenever possible (339). Through Vorbis' character, readers are shown what a member of a religion who does not believe may be like, highlighting that even those who act the most devoutly may not actually be devout.

Although the Omnians are largely mocked for the duration of the novel, the conditions of their lives are also shown to be pitiable. They live in fear of death and torture, because "people like Vorbis made the stick so good, that's all [Omnians] end[ed] up believing in" (427). And it is because of this fear that they live according to all the rules given to them by their religion and their nation. Rules that give them less freedom than Ephebean slaves have: "Er… you don't get any days off […] and one less meal," Brutha explains to a slave, who then responds "Really? I think I'll give freedom a miss then, thanks" (357). It is rather paradoxical that a slave should have it better than a freeman and as such, raises the question of whether Omnians are free at all. The Ephebean Tyrant raises this question in conversation with Vorbis after being told that Omnians have no word for slave: "I imagine fish have no word for water" (356). Omnians do not realise that they are enslaved by their nation and church because they do not know what slavery is. They are also not allowed to educate themselves because they might encounter heretical texts and if they are found with heretical materials in their possession, they will be tortured. As such, the vicious cycle the Omnians are in is not necessarily their own

fault, but rather a system of oppression that it is difficult for an individual to combat particularly when he is denied access to information that might make him see the flaws in the system.

If Omnians are not afraid of punishment, they are monks, priests or soldiers competing for a better position inside the hierarchy of the Church, believing in power rather than Om (Mansikkamäki, 79). Even Vorbis, the head of the Quisition, is after a more powerful position than the one he already has. He wishes to become the prophet and as such the leader of the Church and Omnia. This leadership position would allow him to expand Omnia where he wishes. He does, however, vehemently believe in the structures provided by his church. On the flipside is Simony, a sergeant of the Holy Legion, who thinks that facts cannot inspire people, because people need a cause and a symbol for which to fight (430). Simony is also secretly an atheist and a member of the Turtle Moves movement: from his particular viewpoint, readers are shown how dangerous it is to rise against the existing structures and the dangers of his movement's type of militant fanaticism. They use the fact that Discworld swims across the universe atop a turtle as evidence that Omnianism is false and Om does not exist. Neither side is right about how the world works or how people should react to what others believe but both sides believe that they are correct: the turtle exists but so does Om. Their real life parallel is in that antithetical pair of theist and atheist that is often entirely incapable of seeing where the other side is coming from: they are both unwavering in their belief that they are right.

By the end of the novel, Brutha, however, falls in between these two extremes as would probably most followers of any religion: although they believe, they do not spend their lives trying to force others to believe as they do. This is the happy medium that is shown to be the least dangerous for everyone else in *Small Gods*. For instance, the Ephebeans allow religious freedom within their nation, which allows them to concentrate on things other than persecuting one another for incorrect religious beliefs. As a result, they spend their time expressing themselves artistically and inventing new gadgets instead of attempting to remain in power or

invisible. When they do go to war, they only do so in defence of their nation, not their religion like their neighbouring Omnia does, nor in defence of an ideal like Simony is ready to do. As one of their leaders says to Brutha, "We are here to see that Omnia is no longer a threat" (482). Most people in positions with no power will simply follow orders given to them by their leaders, and it is these leaders who need to be moderate and able to make decisions that benefit everyone, not just themselves or as Simony puts it after Om brings the gods to stop the war, "I'm not doing this for any sort of god, whether they exist or not! I'm doing it for other people!" (489). Brutha chooses to walk up to the armies of Ephebe by himself to negotiate peace rather than allow total annihilation of either party: he trusts that the Ephebeans will see reason after Vorbis's death. Brutha is ready to allow other religions to "build holy places" in Omnia in order to keep the peace, but unfortunately religion alone is not enough to end the war before it even begins (484). Although the beliefs of moderates like Brutha may be equally misguided, they seem at peace with others choosing different paths: they just need to realise that despite their own devotion to a higher power, religions are not the only things making the world go around.

Small Gods uses Brutha's transition from a follower to a prophet to highlight that commandments are more human inventions than divine intervention. Although he has been informed that each prophet invented his own commandments and never really spoke with their god, Brutha expects Om to provide him with new ones because they have actually spoken. After his growth throughout the novel Brutha refuses to choose the most common ones due to his assumption that gods might change their minds (473-4) but as Om has already stricken the earlier 512 commandments from the gigantic bronze doors of the city (249), it is unsurprising that he would have to negotiate new commandments with Om. These are commandments that both Omnians and Om will have to follow. These new commandments are much freer and less driven by Om's fear of dwindling out of existence. They are commandments of a god altered by his recent perspective of "looking up at things, and not down" (Cockrell). These

commandments are also ones that do not dehumanize believers and unbelievers, unlike the previous ones which were plenty and largely concentrated on the destruction of infidels and heretics. This is similar to the way in which the Bible's Old Testament is harsher and includes more rules to follow while the New Testament centres on the Golden Rule: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (*KJV,* Matthew 7:12). As they have learned more, people have naturally moved away from those harsher commands and simply incorporated the ones they thought important in legislation, such as making stealing and murder crimes.

Combining these aspects of a pitiable populace governed by fear with those of their blind belief and loss of faith paints an interesting picture of how fear and lack of knowledge lead to followers with very little empathy for the outside world. These followers have rarely been shown kindness within the walls of their nation and this has made them crueller. Because they lack knowledge, they will also latch onto or violently discard any that comes their way: they have not learned to think critically because they have been fed an ideal since they were born. This does not mean that the outside world should not have compassion for those stuck at the lower levels of this unfair system as these meek followers are just trying to live their lives without getting killed. Nor does it mean that they are not capable of becoming kinder and perhaps even critical thinkers if given the chance and being nudged along gently. Attacking Omnianism head on only appears to strengthen its grasp on its people, but discussions with willing and open-minded individuals allows them and their discussion partners to grow. *Small Gods* seems to say that change for an institution must begin internally and not by force but through knowledge and education.

5. God and Scripture

Having discussed organized religion, its followers and prophets as well as the factors that might lead to loss of faith and of belief, the novel also discusses gods and scripture. Gods throughout history have been presented in a myriad of ways and *Small Gods* plays these descriptions off against their own caricatures. These caricatures, in turn, rise from within scriptures themselves, which the novel discusses further as it attempts to establish a sense of tolerance for people's differing beliefs and remind readers that they should not blindly rely on anything they read. The important question in everyone's minds seems to be whether religious texts are factual and, if they are not, whether it should really matter.

5.1 The Great God Turtle

Small Gods frequently casts its gods in a rather unflattering light as they are shown to be entirely moulded by their followers, to behave poorly and all in all, to be not quite as perfect as they (and our religions) would like us to believe.

Like all religions, Omnianism struggles with the question of what their god should look like. Historically gods have been spirits, animal-headed creatures and men in the clouds or atop a mountain, but when it comes to animals, many cultures have been specific about which animals a god may take as their incarnation on Earth. Cultures in *Small Gods* express similarly strong views on what their gods should be like. The appearance of Om the god as a turtle seems unlikely to Brutha, because Om is supposed to appear as majestic or terrifying creatures like eagles and bulls (256). The ungodlike appearance adds to the amusement created by Om the god, particularly since this turtle can barely take care of itself and if it cannot take care of itself, how is it supposed to take care of people. This amusement may, however, be only a secondary purpose of his appearance: Discworld travels on top of a turtle called A'Tuin, which the people

of the Disc have only recently discovered (428-30). Given that "the turtle moves" has as a result of this discovery become the slogan for those standing against Omnianism in its current form (263-4), Om appearing as a turtle may itself be a significant statement, because it highlights a certain connectedness between religions and the facts surrounding them. Or, at the very least, help Omnians start believing in Om again. A less cynical reader might even see this as a way in which religion and science could sometimes be harmonious if their goals were aligned: as Omnians regain belief in Om the Turtle, they will also be more accepting of the scientific fact that their world does, indeed, ride atop a turtle's shell.

Small Gods also draws attention to how people think gods should act and what they should do. Om's behaviour is in many ways as ungodlike as his appearance seems to Brutha. He throws tantrums (315-8), threatens Brutha with lightning bolts which he is unable to produce (276), and complains. He does not perform miracles nor does he listen to people's prayers. In fact, this lack of godly behaviour may very well be part of why his believers have withered down to just one: he has stopped listening to their prayers and proving his existence to his followers. Although the possibility that he never listened is also raised: "'But if you've been down here as a tortoise, who's been listening to the prayers? […]' 'I don't know,' said the tortoise. 'Who did it before?'" (276-277). He behaves more like a child than a mighty god. Then again, given gods are in eternal competition with other gods for followers so that they may exist (412), a certain level of immaturity should be expected. Since Om appears to stand in for the Abrahamic god of the Christian, Islamic and Jewish faiths, Om's childish behaviour could be an exaggerated parodic reproduction of the god from the Bible that is meant to show that gods are just as imperfect as we are.

Omnians pray to their god for the same mundane reasons as followers of any other faith would, such as to ask for wealth and protection, and like them rarely, if ever, hear back from Om. The gods on Discworld appear to only respond when someone claims that they do not

exist, although the ones people believe in on Earth do not seem to react even then. This may be because many of the gods have too many followers praying for them at once, and as a result they cannot make out what is being said (348). However, they might simply not believe humans worth their time and instead treat them as pawns in a game, or as P'tang-P'tang says to Om: "You want fight, you get your humans fight his humans" (488). After all, gods on Discworld are selfish, childish creatures only looking to remain in existence and not become spirits wandering around the deserts unseen and unheard (412). That is to say that like men, they are afraid of dying. The gods of Discworld also specialize in different things from thunder to wisdom (342-343) the same way old European gods, like the Greek pantheon of gods, did. They are parodic and exaggerated representations of different European gods from the Greek to the Abrahamic, some of which Europeans have long since stopped worshipping: they have died as *Small Gods* puts it.

Small Gods spends a significant amount of its time showing how flawed its gods are. Gods do not possess higher wisdom nor do they exist everywhere at once. This point is raised early on in conversations between Brutha and Om, who states: "I'm not omnicognisant!" (275) and asks Brutha if it has "occurred to [him] - - that [Om] might not be able to do that and be down [t]here walking around with a shell on?" (300). The biblical god asks his followers to not kill others (*KJV,* Exodus 20:13) but has previously called down a flood that killed most people and animals on Earth (*KJV*, Genesis 7:21-23). How are his followers supposed to act in a morally sustainable way if their god's example is the exact opposite of what he asks for? A trip back to the realm of gods makes Om think about how "It seemed simpler when you were up here. It was all a game" and how easy it is to forget that down on Discworld "People died" (488). And, indeed, as Brutha states: "That's why gods die. They never believe in people. But you have a chance. All you need to do is … believe." (475). If a god expects belief or any other action from its followers, it should follow those rules itself as well: it should believe in its

followers. Gods, just like the men who invent them, are flawed and just like their gods, people sometimes act as though the world was their chessboard. People should remember that they invented their gods because, as Brutha says, “We get the gods we deserve” (485) And like gods, people are not perfect and as such cannot be expected to create perfect institutions around their gods. Instead, they should find compassion for others and themselves, and remember to believe in one another.

5.2 Fact or Fiction?

Small Gods debates the reality of religions by delving into who wrote scripture, what kind of relationship gods and their prophets have, and further discussing if religion has to be fact to be true or worth believing in for someone.

Small Gods discusses belief in scripture and how much of scripture is fictional, questioning whether belief can be anything other than blind. Before his ascension from follower to prophet, Brutha is shocked to find out that most, if not all, of the holy texts of his religion were made up by the prophets who wrote them. This may be partially because he does not understand how lying works, but more because his people actually live by these lies: “Hundreds of thousands of people live their lives by the Abjurations and the Precepts!” (275). This is the part of religion that *Small Gods* appears to take issue with: these hundreds of thousands of people follow these words blindly with no criticism or scepticism and then attempt to force others to believe as they do. However, the novel seems to take no issue with people believing in general: the Ephebeans and their beliefs are not shown in a particularly bad light. They have many gods and they are allowed to criticize those gods and their tenets or even choose to place their faith in philosophy instead. There is an expectation placed on all parties equally by the novel: if someone believes in something, they should be capable of and, indeed, allowed to criticize and question it where necessary. Religions, ideologies and governments

are not infallible and as such should not be followed blindly. Even in science, mistakes happen but unlike the other options, science is expected to correct itself. The novel's aim is not to force people to stop believing but rather to help them see that belief does not need to be blind. One can believe and think for oneself.

Small Gods explores the one sided relationship between god and prophet, and questions the factuality of religious texts. Some of Om's prophets have not actually met him whilst others he cannot remember at all (274-7). There is also a certain amount of fiction in their writing because Om openly states that he did not tell many of the prophets anything. In fact, with some of them Om did nothing but show off something entertaining that he had only recently figured out, such as turning into a flame (275). This brings attention to both the god's childishness and the duplicitous nature of his prophets. Additionally, if only the prophet has heard them speak, how can what they write be proven to be true, which is what Brutha realises after one of his first conversations with Om, "But – but […] you're saying the prophets were … just men who wrote things down!" (276). Everything written by these prophets should be taken with a grain of salt, but instead Omnians, who know no better, take them as the word of god. Even in this universe where the god can be scientifically proven to be real, the laws and tenets of their religion are human inventions. This does not necessarily mean that all the rules that they have invented are bad or self-serving: when Brutha discusses possible new commandments with his new friends, they suggest ones familiar to followers of many real world religions, "not killing people" chief among them (474). This suggests that morally good people like Brutha are likely to invent morally good rules for a religion as well. However, it is interesting that these rules should need the backing of a religion or god for other people to follow them, suggesting that people who are not absolutely morally good need an authority figure to inform them of the difference between right and wrong.

In *Small Gods* it is also pointed out that beings that exist, such as the turtle A'Tuin, do not need to be believed in, because they will remain real regardless of the lack of belief (428-30). Unlike beings that do exist, gods and anthropomorphic personifications, like Death and the Hogfather, need to be believed in because otherwise they will cease to exist, and if they stop existing perhaps people will stop believing in justice, mercy and duty as well (*The Hogfather*, 744-5). These concepts - justice, mercy, duty, etc. - can only be "real insofar as we act as if they are real" (Keeping, 262) and the same could be said of religion, faith and gods. Because gods require human belief to exist, this belief also shapes them from powers to possible incarnations on Earth: gods are human inventions and as such, either made in their own image and flawed or representing an ideal that may be unattainable. It then stands to reason that belief itself is not inherently bad but rather that what we do with that belief and in its name can be. What also follows is that although a person may not personally believe in a god or follow a specific religion, his lack of belief does not make that god or that religious institution any less real: as long as people act as though those gods exist, they are real to those people. Because these things are real for other people, we should be respectful of what they believe even if it is not how we see the world. Similarly, those who do believe in something should give others the same courtesy.

6. Conclusions

Pratchett highlights the intolerance and dogmatism of religion without reproducing it in his own writing: the aim seems to be to avoid becoming what he is preaching against. Ultimately, every single follower of Om is doing what is best for themselves: making sure they do not get accused of heresy. While the blindness with which they follow orders is mocked, showing their conditions and the fear they feel allows for compassion as well as humour. One might say, tentatively, that the criticism of *Small Gods* is not so much anti-religion where belief is concerned but rather a criticism of the things we do out of fear and faith or simple ignorance.

Satire of religion in *Small Gods* is comparatively soft: other satirists have outright attacked their religious targets (Griffin, 57-8) or come across as bullying (Griffin, 80) rather than humorous. Pratchett, on the other hand, does not attack in that same, direct manner but rather shows different sides of belief: a militant extremist, a blind follower, a critical thinker and an atheist. Readers are presented with many different gods and multiple ways of incorporating them in cultural, scientific and political contexts. The novel gently nudges its readers towards questions rather than outright telling them that everything presented is bad. Readers are expected to recognize aspects of real religious institutions, faiths and members of those religions, and perhaps even recognize their own shortcomings where critical thinking is concerned. It could be theorized that this softness is in an effort to avoid acting in the manner that Pratchett is criticizing. Pratchett presents a religion that does not allow people to think freely and which demands that everyone believe as the institution has mandated; its followers are too afraid and ignorant to voice their opinions and willing to resort to violence against others to avoid suspicion being laid on themselves. It is a religion of repression and exclusion but if the satirist were to treat it harshly, he would become as much a hypocrite as the characters he presents.

Small Gods is also a criticism of how people use others and perhaps even make them more like themselves: Vorbis, who is not ultimately evil, "makes good people do evil" and "turns them into things like himself" (391). He also uses Brutha, who in many ways does not yet have an identity of his own (Mendlesohn, 2004. 243), for his amazing memory. In the course of the book, Brutha starts to think for himself instead of allowing himself to be controlled by Vorbis or by Om. In this sense, *Small Gods* is a novel about critical thinking: One can believe in something but that does not mean that they have to be blind to its flaws. Alongside its thoughts on critical thinking, the novel also reminds its readers about the dangers of ignorance and how that may lead us to believe things that are incorrect or dangerous. What we believe in is not always right, correct or even good, and certainly does not give us the right to behave in a manner that is not, ethically speaking, right. How Pratchett handles this ignorance or lack of critical thinking in a critique centred on subjects such as politics, science or law enforcement would make for an interesting continuation of this line of inquiry.

Small Gods presents an institutional religion that has gone too far and requires reform to find a way to become humane again. Although it is easy for those outside the institution to see the need for reform, those inside may struggle to see it or, if they recognise the need, a safe approach to reform. Members of a religious institution may find kinship and solace in their religion and as such react poorly when faced with accusations that would shatter their worldview. They may even be capable of explaining through their religion why what they have been told cannot be true. Therefore external pressure and factors cannot instigate the reform of an institutional religion, but rather reform must rise from within: Brutha recognises the issues within his religion after seeing the world and having many discussions with his god and the people surrounding him. But even when armed with this information, he struggles to see a way for himself to instigate change in the institution.

The belief discussed in *Small Gods* is not just religious belief but also belief in different causes and sometimes in search of truth: people can become fanatical about anything they believe strongly in, be it science, religion or their homeland. It is this blind obedience or faith out of fear or belief that *Small Gods* warns its readers about, not simple religious conviction. It must then be asked if blindly believing in someone or something can ever be a good course of action and if it is possible to be free of blind belief and blind obedience in other contexts, such as that of an army or a law enforcement agency. *Small Gods* seems to suggest the possibility of blind belief and obedience free groups, but their existence depends on how many are courageous and critical enough to stand against those demanding blind obedience. It is up to the people within those groups never to stop being critical: if belief shifts, it may also return to a previous state of blindness.

Even if Omnianism "is all made up and … has nothing to do with any 'Earthly' deity" (Pratchett and Simpson, 30), it can still teach us about our own world by way of reminding us of how religion behaves be it in conjunction with politics or science. Political decisions should not be made based on religious beliefs or simple militaristic aspirations, but we cannot demand that those with faith become superhuman and somehow manage to ignore their own personal morals. Instead, decisions should be made with the best of the nation and its people in mind. Equally the people should have free access to information so that they may question both the information they have been given and the actions of their government. This free access would also allow them to alter the world around themselves through research and invention. Freedom of information gives them power over the direction of their lives. In this satirical treatment of faith, Pratchett champions critical thinking towards our surroundings and understanding in our judgements of other people and their beliefs as we try to find our way through life and discover what we find worth believing in.

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